No. 12

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

The wretched woman stood aghast. She realized the uselessness of a denial. Hot tears rushed to her eyes and blurred her vision. For a moment she swayed. A pair of arms were opened, and she rushed into them.

R. of M. G., No. 12.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

FOR AN uncomfortable length of time these two women stood confronting each other. The expression on Alice's face was one of surprise and also annoyance. Instinctively she did not like this intruder because she happened to be Dr. Van Buren's sister. But she pulled herself together quickly and made an attempt to smile.

Josephine Van Buren finally broke the embarassing silence.

"I—I hope I have not taken too great a liberty in walking through the grounds," she stammered apologetically.

"Not at all," the second Mrs. Gordon assured her. "Lovely place, isn't it?"

"Wonderful," the visitor exclaimed. "How happy you must be to have a home like this, Mrs. Gordon."

The latter made a gesture with her hand. She said in a voice that expressed little enthusiasm:

"Yes, it is a wonderful place. But one tires of seeing the same sights day after day. It becomes so monotonous at times. Personally I prefer the city. And I would not remain buried here if my husband could be coaxed away. He thinks no other place in the world is so healthy as this."

"No doubt he has the children in mind," Miss Van Buren answered. "How is little Harry, Mrs. Gordon?"

Alice showed unmistakable signs of irritation.

"He is not improving like he ought to," she declared curtly. "But it is no fault of mine. I have tried to be a mother to another woman's children, but they don't appreciate me."

Josephine gave the speaker a sharp glance.

She had been most unfavorably impressed with the second Mrs. Gordon's personality at two previous

meetings, and now she found her cold and repellent. She had not the least desire to prolong the conversation.

As she turned to go back to her brother's car, Alice hailed her.

"Come and sit down over here for a little while, Miss Van Buren," she invited pleasantly as she indicated a rustic bench to the right. "I would like to talk to you."

The invitation was accepted and a moment later both women were seated comfortably.

Josephine became conscious that she was being studied by Mrs. Gordon. A feeling not entirely conducive to mental ease took possession of her.

"Is it hot in the city?" Alice asked suddenly.

"Not so bad now, but it was unbearable a few days ago," came back slowly. "The suffering in the tenement district was intense. You are fortunate in having a summer home like this during the heated period."

"Yes," the other admitted. "I suppose I ought to be content."

"You ought to be, indeed," Miss Van Buren seconded heartily. "Whenever I see a place like this I can not help but think of all the misery which exists in the thickly populated parts of Chicago. You can't realize all the misery which exists there unless you see it with your own eyes.

"I had occasion to accompany my brother on several professional visits," she went on, a sad note creeping into her voice. "What I saw was appalling. We, who enjoy good health and all the comforts of life, don't appreciate how fortunate we are.

"The sanitary conditions in some quarters are frightful. You would not believe that want and actual starvation could be found in our very midst. But it is true. I dare say there is plenty of work for our home missions to do."

Alice Gordon dragged her eyes back from the lake and allowed them to rest upon the speaker in a keen, searching glance.

"How interesting it must be to see how the poor class of people exist," she said without a trace of feeling.

"It is heartbreaking in some instances," Josephine declared with deep conviction. "Only a week ago my brother was called to a two-room flat very poorly furnished to take care of a wretched young woman about to become a mother.

"I happened to be with him, and what I saw actually made me sick. She had no husband to comfort or provide for her. She——"

"Do you mean to say that she was unmarried and had a baby?" Mrs. Gordon broke in.

"No, the poor thing was married alright, but she and her husband had become separated for some reason," the other explained hurriedly. "It was fortunate perhaps, that the baby died. The young mother is a woman of evident refinement.

"How she came to be in a neighborhood like that, is a mystery. She calls herself Mrs. Harding and she—she——"

Josephine paused abruptly because Mrs. Gordon had suddenly turned deathly pale and she was gripping her arm.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Gordon?" she asked, alarmed. "You look ill."

"No, it is nothing," Alice replied in a tone that was more like a gasp. "You see, I am looking forward to the coming of the stork myself and I get such horrible dizzy spells."

A long pause followed.

It became very evident that the second Mrs. Gordon labored under the stress of some powerful emotion.

By degrees, however, she regained her composure. Her lips twisted into a peculiar smile.

"Tell me a little more about — about this Mrs. Harding," she requested, her face averted.

Josephine obliged willingly. She told how she happened to be with her brother and how gladly she had missed the Palmer ball in orded to assist the doctor in his work.

"It was the only really worth while thing I have ever done in all my life," she confessed frankly. "It gave me such pleasure that I have decided to spend a part of my time each day to help those in need and distress. I am happy to say that my brother is backing me wholeheartedly."

Something like a sneer crossed Alice's face. But she changed its expression swiftly when she caught Miss Van Buren looking at her.

"It seems a pity that we have so much and others so little," she said with a show of sympathy that lacked sincerity. "I should like to do something for this—this Mrs. Harding. If you will give me her address, I'll——"

"I am making arrangements to take care of her," Josephine interrupted. "My brother and I have agreed to employ her as one of our domestics as soon as she is well enough to work."

"How nice and kind of you and Dr. Van Buren." The second Mrs. Gordon's voice was cold—almost mocking in her sympathy.

Another long pause ensued.

Alice seemed deeply in thought and a strange expresion came into her eyes. From time to time she stole a furtive glance at her companion.

Josephine could not have suspected what was going on in Mrs. Gordon's mind.

And utterly unsuspecting in the course of conver-

sation, she revealed the address of her protege. The moment Alice had this information, she changed the subject adroitly.

For quite a while they chatted about different things until Dr. Van Buren's tall figure was seen sauntering toward them.

"Alright, sis," he called cheerfully. "I am ready to go back to town."

He raised his hat politely to Mrs. Gordon, who gave him a curt nod in return. Josephine linked her arm through that of her brother, and saying a hurried goodbye to Alice, they strolled off.

The latter, left alone, rose and began pacing back and forth deeply agitated. The expression on her face was that of a woman who has suddenly made a frightful discovery.

"I must find out who this Mrs. Harding is," she muttered to herself. "It can't be Betty, and yet, such a thing is not impossible. I haven't heard from her since that automobile mechanic husband of hers was sent to the penitentiary.

"She might have gone to the dogs morally, but I don't think she could sink so low as to end up in a cheap flat with a baby. Betty was always weak and easily influenced. I dread to think that she went to the gutter entirely."

Alice had the intuitive feeling that her fears would be realized.

And while her mind already accepted it as a fact, her black soul rose in rebellion. There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes as she rapidly walked back to the house.

On their way homeward, Dr. Van Buren and his sister were discussing the magnificent Gordon summer home. Neither of them spoke about Alice.

They drove past the wretched tenement building which sheltered Mrs. Harding, and found her vastly improved.

While the great sorrow which dwelled in her young heart could be plainly read in her eyes, her words were hopeful and she expressed her gratitude to Dr. Van Buren and his sister.

"I am afraid I shall never be able to repay you for all you have done for me," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "I did not know that such kindness existed in this world."

"You must not think about repaying us, my dear," Josephine answered as she patted Mrs. Harding's head. "In a few days I am going to take you home with me, don't forget that. You promised to come, and I am sure we will be the best of friends."

"Oh, I know we will," the unhappy young mother murmured, close to tears. "I'll try so hard to please you."

Dr. Van Buren examined the patient once more and he nodded his head in evident satisfaction. He thought that Mrs. Harding would be able to take short exercises by walking up and down the room a few times each day.

"I am sure you will regain your strength quickly," he declared. "Youth is a wonderful thing."

It was the third day after this visit that Dr. Van Buren came home and reported to his sister that Mrs. Harding had disappeared without leaving a trace. Inquiries among the other dwellers in the big tenement house failed to disclose any reliable facts.

One woman on the same floor told the physician that she was positive Mrs. Harding had a visitor the night before at a very late hour, and that there had been quite a commotion.

Another spoke of having seen a closed car standing in front of the building for quite a while that same night.

Further than that, nothing could be learned which might give a reason for Mrs. Hardings strange disappearance. It proved to be a mystery that remained unsolved.

Chapter 39

THE WOMAN BETWEEN.

ONLY THOSE who have passed through the lane of fear which leads to unutterable grief and despair, can fully understand what poor Marie suffered as she again stood face to face with those she had loved and lost. Under an assumed name and the face of a stranger, she was foreed to seek for the crumbs of happiness such as grim circumstances offered.

Ah, the bitter irony of being engaged as a governess for her own children.

But this was not all she would be called upon to endure. The man whom she had loved with all the strength of her soul—and God help her—still loved, in spite of the bitter wrong done, called another his wife.

Marie, as she sat in the train which sped back to Milwaukee, went over the situation calmly.

She found herself wondering if she could stand seeing Philip lavish his affection upon another woman. It would not have been so hard if she had been any other but Alice.

Marie determined to devote herself entirely to the children. She would, so far as possible, avoid Phil and his second wife. That playing the role of an utter stranger in her own home would be a hard task, she realized. But there was no evading unpleasant possibilities. Her children needed her, and beyond that she tried not to think.

Immediately upon her arrival at the Hargrave residence she had a talk with her mistress. Old Mrs.

Hargrave became highly incensed when her young companion spoke of leaving within two weeks.

Her angry surprise robbed her of her power of speech for a while. She just stared and stared at Marie, who sat with her head lowered, like a criminal waiting to be sentenced. No, this could not be true.

She had learned to love this Miss Desmond almost like a daughter.

"You—you don't mean it, Marie!" she broke out at last. "How in the world am I going to get along without you?"

Marie swallowed hard a few times, and she looked pleadingly at the silvery haired old lady.

"I know I should have given you at least a month's notice, dear Mrs. Hargrave," she said self-accusingly. "I realize two weeks is such a short time, and I am——"

"No," Mrs. Hargrave interrupted. pale and excited. "The time makes no difference. Why must you leave at all? That is what I want to know. If it is a question of more money, I'll settle that quickly. You can name your own salary and it will lbe paid without argument."

The lovely young companion shook her head sadly.

"It isn't a question of money," she answered, her voice soft and persuasive. "And it isn't because of any difference between you and I. You have been very, very kind."

Mrs. Hargrave snorted with impatience.

"Then why must you leave?" she demanded.

"I—I wish I could tell you, but I dare not," Marie almost sobbed. "Please, don't make it so hard for me."

"Well, I suppose some man is responsible," grumbled the old lady, her suspicion aroused. "If you are going to be married why don't you tell a person? I could not blame you. All women will be fools. I was one my-

self." She laughed. "If you are bound to take the leap. I hope you've picked a man who is able to support you decently. If he don't, you come back here."

"Nothing is farther from my mind than even the thought of being married a—" She stopped short and corrected herself hastily. "I shall never marry, Mrs. Hargrave."

The latter wagged her head, not at all satisfied. But she had tact enough to refrain from prying into her companion's private affairs.

The look of bitter disappointment died out of her eyes. It gave way to an expression of deep concern.

She talked as only a mother would to her young daughter in danger. She coaxed and pleaded until at last Marie, unable to stand it any longer, fled from the room in tears.

During the last two weeks, Mrs. Hargrave made several fruitless attempts to get Marie to change her mind.

Finally she gave it up and bowed sorrowfully to the inevitable.

When the hour of parting came, Mrs. Hargrave wept softly. She assisted her young companion in every possible way and presented her with a beautiful wrist-watch studded with diamonds.

"It—it is just a little gift to remember me by," she said tearfully.

"I shall always remember you as one of the kindeset employers and best friends I ever had," Marie responded as she broke down completely.

The Hargrave limousine took her to the railroad station, and Marie at once allowed her mind to drift into another channel.

Mother love, deep and irresistible, drew her toward a life of endless torture and self denial. But she

set her teeth and tried to smile.

There was but one prayer in her heart and that was that she may never be recognized. But prayers are not always answered.

The second Mrs. Philip Gordon greeted her kindly enough. At the first glance, however, Marie detected a change in her. Alice was not the same. She gave the impression of a woman worried and ill at ease.

The expression in her eyes was that of one who has committed a crime and is afraid of being found out.

"Your room is ready, Miss Desmond," she said, her manner suddenly cold. "Go right upstairs and Annie will take care of you."

The ruddy glow of the late afternoon sun was streaming through the windows as Marie made her way to the second floor. She needed no servant to direct her.

With a frantically beating heart she made for the nursery. Little Harry had just awakened from a refreshing sleep and appeared to be somewhat brighter than usual.

Phyllis was busily engaged with her dolls, but she turned quickly to greet the new governess. The boy's big eyes were eloquent and he lifted himself into a sitting posture.

"How are both of you?" Marie inquired anxiously, taking the girl in her arms and pressing the boy to her throbbing bosom. "Ah, I am so glad to be with you again. And now I am going to stay. Ah, the good times we'll have together, won't we?"

Before either of the children could answer the door opened, and Philip Gordon entered. He was surprised to see Harry and Phyllis cling to a stranger with such evident affection.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said politely. "I heard you had returned, Miss Desmond, so I came to welcome

you."

Marie allowed the little girl to slip to the floor.

A sick feeling was in her heart. She forced herself to remain calm, although every nerve thrilled with emotion.

"I was pleased to witness the little scene as I came in," Philip spoke again, and rather slowly. "I see you possess natural love for children. I can not tell you how glad I am of that, Miss Desmond. My poor boy will need all of your love and attention, for he has been rather neglected until now."

Marie's lips moved, but she could not have uttered a sound if her very life had depended upon it. She inclined her head and forced a smile.

A deep sigh escaped Philip's lips as he approached the bed.

"How do you feel this evening, my boy?" he asked tenderly.

It was touching to see Harry take a hold of his father's hand and press it against his feverish cheek.

"Sometimes I feel a sharp pain in my breast, dad," the boy replied, "and then I have to cough. But the doctor will soon make me well, won't he? I want to go out and play like Phyllis."

"Of course, you'll soon be well, little pal of mine," the father said more tenderly than before. "But you must obey the doctor's instructions and take your medicine faithfully. And you'll do that, won't you?"

The boy nodded and gave his dad a pitiful smile.

During the brief moment of silence which fell, Marie stood, clutching the back of a chair.

Her eyes were fixed on her former husband's features. They were obviously not those of a happy and contented man. The constant painful quivering of his lips betrayed hidden sorrow.

"Dad," Harry said suddenly, his voice holding a pleading note, "I wish you would tell me a story to-night. Will you?"

"I am afraid I won't have time," the father responded.

"Will you to-morrow, then?" the boy persisted.

"No, not to-morrow either, dear," came back regretfully. "You see, I have to go to the city and spend all day in my office. And when I get home in the evening I am usually very tired, and then we have so much company that must be entertained. But you have so many nice story books. Can't you——"

"I will be glad to read to him," Marie interrupted in a low tone.

"Ah, that would be very good of you, Miss Desmond," Philip said gratefully. "Both of my children love stories. I hope they wont give you too much trouble."

There was infinite comfort for Marie in the way Philip expressed himself.

He had called Harry and Phyllis "his children" which indicated that he did not include his second wife in ownership.

"No trouble could be too great for me, Mr.—Mr. Gordon," she stammered confusedly. "There is not a thing I would not do for your children, for I have learned to love them already."

As he bowed in acknowledgement of her words, his eyes rested on her face searchingly for a moment. Had he recognized that voice? Marie paled and began to tremble under his prolonged glance.

Just then a door was slammed with unnecessary violence in one of the other rooms downstairs.

Philip started up guiltily and said a hasty goodby to the children. Again he looked at the new governess.

His handsome face was turned to the window through which came the glare of the setting sun.

This gave Marie an opportunity to study the featurse she had loved so dearly. Ah, what a change!

Time had not passed without leaving marks that could never be removed. Phil's hair was beginning to turn gray at the temples. His brow, once so smooth, showed many lines.

"No, he is not happy," thought Marie, and her soul rose ecstatically. "Alice failed to replace me in his heart. She may be his wife, but he does not love her."

And how true it was. Ah, if she could have known how wretchedly unhappy Phil had come to be.

When he had left the room, Marie sank down upon a chair in an agony of despair. She had thought at one time that she hated this man. But those thoughts were of the mind and not of the heart.

She might have known that a love like hers can never be killed. She felt it now. It was alive—keenly alive!

But another woman stood between them now. Ah, to love Phil as she did; to yearn for his affection with this passionate jealous longing, and to know that they were separated for ever and ever.

Marie felt that he was not happy with Alice.

The tired tone of his voice, his stooped shoulders, the bowed head and the weary expression about his mouth had revealed a truth that was glorious to the one who had been so terribly wronged in the days gone by.

Annie's sudden entrance interrupted Marie's train of thoughts. She rose quickly to greet this girl whose loyalty remained unquestioned.

"So glad to see you, Miss Desmond," Annie said as she came forward and held out her hand.

"I am glad to be here," was Marie's truthful re-

joinder.

"Mrs. Gordon instructed me to show you around a bit," the girl declared. "Please come with me. I want to show you your room first of all. And you must meet the rest of the servants."

It was an experience such as Marie could never forget.

She was introduced as "Miss Desmond, the new governess," to men and women who formerly took orders from her. Yes, they were still in her husband's employ. But there was one new face among them.

Marie experienced a peculiar sensation as she stood face to face with Nora Evans. There was something about this girl, slightly past her youth, which was singularly repellent. She was pretty enough, in a way.

"You'll have to watch her," Annie warned Marie at a safe distance.

"Why?" the new governess wanted to know.

"She is Mrs. Gordon's personal servant and spy," came the disagreeable information. "Nora Evans is somewhat of a privileged character in this house. She butts in everywhere. She is a dangerous tattler and a trouble maker."

"I do not anticipate any trouble with Miss Nora Evans because I expect to give her a wide berth," said Marie, her voice trembling a little. "I understand that she has been very rough with the children. She even struck them without provocation, she won't dare——"

"Hush!" came Annie's quick caution. "Here she comes."

Nora Evans with the noiseless tread of a female leopard had followed them. But Annie, looking back saw her just in time.

By the time they returned to the nursery, Marie felt physically exhausted. And her state of mind was

seriously disturbed. When dinner was announced, she begged to be excused.

"I don't think I could eat a bite," she said to Annie. "I'll feed the children."

"Alright," replied Annie. "I'll go down to the kitchen and have the children's meals sent up. They always eat in the nursery, you know. Mrs. Gordon insists upon that. She says it irritates her having little Phyllis at the same table with her."

"Oh, does it?" Marie drew a sharp breath and a sudden flash came into her eyes.

"She don't like them, that's all," the girl went on confidentially. "If there ever was a mean stepmother, the second Mrs. Gordon is it. She positively hates Harry and Phyllis. I don't think she'd shed a tear if they both died over night."

Marie gave an involuntary shudder and turned away.

"I'll run down and get my dinner and come right back," Annie said, and disappeared.

When the children's meals were brought up Marie watched them eat in awed silence for a while. Little Phyllis had developed into a sweet, chatty girl, whose curiosity was immense. She asked innumerable questions which kept the new governess busy answering them.

But Harry worried her. The boy would not eat. He sampled the various delectable dishes, then pushed them aside with a wry face.

"Won't you try that nice strawberry shortcake, dear?" Marie coaxed.

At the sound of her voice he looked up and a smile curled his bloodless lips.

"Do you want me to?" he asked.

"Very much, Harry. You'll make me happy if you

will eat every bit of it. Come now, be a good boy. You know if you don't eat, you will never get well and strong again."

It became evident that the boy's appetite was poor. And it was also evident that he ate merely to please the new governess.

Chapter 40

RECOGNITION

WHEN ANNIE returned about twenty minutes later, Marie made some inquiries about the daily routine in the nursery. Upon being told that Harry had always slept alone in the nursery, she declared that she would have her own bed set up in the same room. In fact she was very determined upon it.

"We better find out first if Mrs. Gordon will permit it," said Annie doubtfully. "I suggested that once, and I got a scolding for my pains."

Miss Desmond, for the moment, completely forgot the role she had assumed. She was trembling with indignation and she drew herself up. This was cruel, yes, inhuman.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "Why should that woman be consulted when the childen are not hers? This boy must have some one with him during the night. Suppose he gets one of those horrible coughing spells? He might not survive it if he is left alone.

"And he ought to be given medicine at night as well as during the day. He——"

"I know," Annie broke in somewhat timidly.

"You have my bed moved into the nursery at once," Marie cried, with a flash of her old imperiousness. "I shall assume all the responsibility. "Phil—Mr. Gordon," she corrected herself swiftly, "has confided the care of this sick boy to me."

Annie had long since learned that it was not a good thing to make any change in arrangements without

first consulting the second Mrs. Gordon.

But something in the tone and the attitude of this new governess impelled her to listen. She was on the point of making another protest when Miss Desmond whirled upon her.

"I am going to have my way in this matter, regardless of what Mrs. Gordon may say," the latter said in a tone of command. "From this hour on I alone am responsible for that poor boy's welfare."

"Very well," Annie answered, and left the room.

But she did not go very far. As she closed the door softly behind her, she stood in the hall for quite a while apparently undecided.

The look on her face was that of one who had suddenly made a tremendous discovery.

A moment later she heard Harry having a violent coughing spell. It was followed by a cry of agony uttered by the new governess.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open, then peered in.

Marie, believing herself alone with the children, had thrown off the mask. She was the unhappy, heart-broken mother, who held her own boy to her breast and called him the same pet names she had used in the long ago.

The little patient's coughing spell had caused a slight hemorrhage, and traces of blood were on his lips.

"You poor lamb," Marie was sobbing. "I'll never leave you again. I will stay with you day and night, until you are well. Oh, thank God, that I arrived just in time,' and she covered the boy's face with kisses.

Annie, still watching through the narrow slit at the door, nodded her head.

"Now, I am sure," she whispered to herself. "Yes I am positive."

There was no longer any hesitation in her movements. In compliance with Miss Desmond's urgent request, she went down stairs and gave orders to have the bed of the new governess moved into the nursery.

It was perhaps two hours later. Marie, having coaxed both of the children to sleep, went to her own room. She had scarcely taken a seat when a knock came on the door.

"Come in," she invited, and rose to her feet.

Annie entered, closed the door and locked it. Then she whirled about and faced Marie.

"Mrs. Gordon!" She began to sob. "Oh, dear Mrs. Gordon. I know it is you."

Marie recoiled a step, white to her very lips.

"Annie!" she gasped, incredulous. "You—you are making a mistake."

"No, I am not," the girl answered. "Don't try to deceive me, dear Mrs. Gordon. I recognized you in spite of your changed face. Your voice, your motions, your mannerisms and every move you made betrayed you. I heard you talk to little Harry. It was his own mother I heard. Oh, you don't know how fortunate it is that you have returned to take care of the children—I mean your children."

The wretched woman stood aghast. She realized the uselessness of a denial. Hot tears rushed to her eyes and blurred the vision.

For a moment she swayed. A pair of arms were opened and she rushed into them with a glad cry. For a long while these two were in each other's embrace, their tears mingling.

Presently they became calm. Marie took the girl's hand and drew her over to the bed on the edge of which they seated themselves.

"Since you know who I am," the former mistress

of the house began in a guarded tone, "I feel that some explanations must be made. It is necessary so that you may understand why my features are so changed and why I dared to come back here."

In a voice which occasionally rose from a low wail of despair to a shrill cry of protest, the discarded wife told her story.

"I was absolutely sure that no one would recognize me," she ended.

"No one did, not even your—your husband," Annie declared. "And perhaps I would never have recognized you but for your defiance of Mrs. Gordon and the scene in the nursery. That convinced me, and——"

"Are you sure that no one else in the house has grown suspicious?" Marie asked tremulously.

"I am sure of that," the girl responded quickly. "But you will have to be more careful in the future. You must change your methods when you are with the children. Play the governess and not the mother. If Mr. Gordon had seen and heard what I did——"

"Yes—yes, I'll be careful," Marie broke in anxiously. "But you must promise one thing, Annie. You must swear that you will not betray me. If my secret is not safe with you, I shall be compelled to leave. I can not risk an exposure and additional humiliation and disgrace.

"Fate has ordained that I must remain a stranger to everyone in this house, even to my own children, though my heart should break."

Annie seized the hand of her former mistress and kissed it almost reverently.

"You have nothing to fear from me," she said. "I swear to you by my hope of Heaven that not a single word shall pass my lips. But it was not at all necessary to impose an oath. In the years gone by you made me

love you with your kindness and gentle consideration.

"When you left, that love was transferred upon the children. I have watched over them faithfully. Oh," she added with sudden emotion, "I have loved them as if they were my very own."

"I know you have," Marie agreed, patting the girl's shoulder. "And I shall be grateful to you until the end of my days. Oh, it is good to have someone to confide in," she went on, the tears coming anew. "I have been frightfully unhappy.

"Nothing is left to me but my two children, and even to them I must remain a stranger. That is what hurts most. Yes, it hurts more than I could tell you in mere words.

"You must help me keep my identity hidden, Annie. Never, in an unguarded moment, or through a slip of the tongue, call me by any other name than the one by which I am known here. To you I shall always be Miss Desmond, or Marie. I would rather have you call me by my first name, for now we are on the same level."

The girl nodded her head vigorously and smiled her acquiescence.

"I shall gladly do whatever you ask of me, dear, dear Mrs.—Marie, I mean," she responded, laughing a little at the slip. "I can't tell you how happy I am to have you back. Even when I heard that you had lost your life, I kept on praying that you might return some day.

"Thank God, it came to pass. And now I must tell you something about all the things which happened while you were gone," she continued, keeping her voice down. "I suppose you knew that Mr. Gordon was married again before you came.

"Well, Alice Procter followed him all the way to Paris. Oh, she is a slick one, she is. But I am sure Mr. Gordon did not make her his wife because he loved her.

"She made such a fuss over the children that he no doubt thought she would make a good mother. For a few months she played the part, then she began to show her true color. She had so many social engagements that she could not pay any attention to the little ones. Then all of a sudden, she showed a keen dislike for them.

"Lately she has been positively hateful. I heard her say one day that she could not bear the sight of the children because they reminded her too much of you, Marie. She even tries to keep Mr. Gordon from them.

"Then there is Nora Evans. If there ever was a she-devil, she is one. It is a shame the way she treats those neglected youngsters. I complained about her to Mrs. Gordon, but I was told to mind my own business. Believe me, Miss Desmond, it is no one's fault but that woman's that Harry took sick."

Marie stared at the speaker, horror expressed in her eyes.

"What woman?" she demanded hoarsely. "Nora Evans or ——"

"Mrs. Gordon," the girl supplied without hesitation. "I believe she is a murderess at heart."

After a moment of tense silence Marie said:

"That is a terrible accusation to make against your mistress. Are you sure that you are not making a mistake?"

"No, I am not," Annie declared vehemently. "Mrs. Gordon demanded that little Harry should sleep with all of his windows open during the early part of spring. It was bitter cold, and the poor boy had only a thin blanket for bed covering.

"There was quite a wrangle about that. I would close the windows, and Mrs. Gordon would send Nora in to open them again. When I closed them for the second time, Nora would wait until I had gone to bed, then

open them."

"Of course, Harry took cold. It developed into pneumonia, and he has not been well since. Dr. Van Buren calls regularly, but he merely shakes his head and says nothing. Once he met me in the hall and asked me some questions.

"I told him what I thought. He said he would keep an eye on Mrs. Gordon. I actually believe that this woman wants to get rid of the boy. She——"

"Annie!" It was a cry of suppressed rage. Marie's face was livid, and she shook as with an ague. "Merciful God, what you tell me is almost unbelievable."

"But it is true," the girl maintained stoutly. "You know, Mrs. Gordon is to have a baby of her own. I suppose she would like to be rid of both or her step-children, so that hers might be the sole heir of the Gordon estate.

"Oh, yes, don't look so disappointed," Annie ended. "You don't know what that woman is capable of. She is as cruel as they make them. As I said a moment ago, I believe that woman is a murderess at heart."

For a long time Marie was unable to utter a sound. It was too horrible to comtemplate, and yet, knowing Alice as she had known her, the girl's hideous story was plausible enough.

Alice had always been cruelly selfish. And she had never forgiven her for taking Philip Gordon away from her.

Not enough that she had done her best to bring about a separation, she went so far as to vent her spite upon two innocent children.

"That woman!" The words came through Marie's clenched teeth. "Oh, that vindictive beast of a woman! My poor boy was made to suffer through her. How I hate her. But she will be punished, never fear."

Annie averted her face. She could not bear to see

the grief and distress so obviously depicted upon her companion's beautiful countenance.

"What I can not understand is why Phil—I mean Mr. Gordon, does not assert himself in behalf of the children," Marie said, wringing her hands. "I am sure he must know something of the condition of affairs in this house.

"Or could it be possible that this she-devil has even succeeded in weaning him away from Harry and Phyllis. God, that would be terrible. If I were sure that this is the case, I'd——"

"I don't think so," the girl asserted. "He loves both of the children, but he dare not show it. His wife demands all of his affection and she dominates him in almost every move he makes."

"But he always had a mind of his own formerly, Annie. I remember very well that I could never swerve him from a set purpose."

Annie shook her head as she said gravely:

"Mr. Gordon is not the man he used to be. Since he married the second time he has changed. Of course, that woman is responsible for it. Sometimes I imagine she has some strange power over him. But this I know to be a fact: he is not happy.

"Many a night I have heard him walk the floor in his room. I have seen him come into the nursery with tears in his eyes, embrace the children and leave the instant Mrs. Gordon called him."

For a minute Marie remained in silent thoughtfulness. Sigh after sigh broke from her lips.

"What has become of Ruth?" she inquired suddenly. "I have not seen her since I came back."

"The poor girl was taken back to the sanitarium," replied Annie.

"Why?"

"Because Mrs. Gordon insisted upon it."

"But Phil was so fond of his only sister. And she was so harmless."

"Yes," Annie said, an angry flash in her eyes. "Ruth was harmless enough. But Mrs. Gordon refused to live in the same house with her. Oh, I shall never forget when the poor girl was taken away.

"She cried bitter tears and threatened to kill herself unless she could stay with her brother. But as usual, Mrs. Gordon's whim was gratified. At times she wields an almost uncanny power over Mr. Gordon. He is not the same man under her influence."

"It is nothing short of a crime," Marie cried passionately. "A little kindness and sympathy would have done more to heal Ruth's mind than anything else. God knows what will become of her now. Confinement in a sanitarium is apt to drive her absolutely insane."

Annie shrugged her shoulders expressively.

"Much Mrs. Gordon cares about that," she declared as they rose. "But I must leave you now. Try to get what happiness you can out of this situation. It was God's hand that led you back here, always remember that. Your children will need you every hour of the day and night, and I believe that Harry will recover with you as his nurse."

"He must recover," the miserable mother exclaimed with an outburst of tears. "If he dies, that woman will be his murderess, and I'll——"

"Not so loud," warned the girl, holding up a finger. "I hear someone coming."

She glided to the door and jerked it open.

"Who is it?" Marie asked in a whisper.

"Nora Evans," Annie answered, closing the door again. "I guess she is on one of her spying trips through the house. We will have to be very careful, for every-

thing she hears she carries back to Mrs. Gordon."

"I shall be careful enough," the other said. "That woman will never find out who I am through a mistake of mine. And you must not betray by a word or sign that I am Mr. Gordon's first wife. He believes me dead, and it is better so. My whole existence shall be devoted to my children."

"You need not worry about me, dear, dear Marie," the girl replied. "My lips are sealed."

Chapter 41

MOTHER AND STEPMOTHER

MARIE had no illusions about the magnitude of her position. She knew that she would need every ounce of her physical and mental strength. It called for a tremendous amount of self-control and tact. And that night before she laid her weary head upon the pillow, she knelt in prayer. In her petition to the almighty God she asked that justice be allowed to prevail.

With her mother heart near the breaking point, she asked that her beloved boy be restored to health.

"Give me his life, oh, Lord, and I will be Thy faithful servant to the end of my days," she concluded.

It seemed that at least some confidence had been restored to her as she sought rest in sleep. The ominous black shadows had been removed from her soul.

She was willing to entrust her future into the hands of Him who decidese the destiny of all humanity.

And having coaxed herself into some semblance of mental tranquility, she closed her eyes. But the goddess of sleep proved elusive. For hours Marie lay awake, staring at the dark sky through the window.

Her thought were all of her children. Ah, how she loved them. And what a blessed privilege it was to minister to them even as a stranger. No one would dare harm them so long as she was close enough to prevent it.

Marie's mouth was set firmly—tragically.

Annie's story had disclosed some dreadful facts. Nora Evans, the second Mrs. Gordon's favorite, had

taken a hand in ruling the children. Of course, she had done this at the behest of her mistress.

But there was to be an end to this. Marie's mind was firmly made up as to that. She could not conceive the idea of being reprimanded or perhaps even discharged if she clashed with Nora.

Marie fell asleep at last. When she awakened the sun stood high on the horizon. She was out of bed with a bound and dressed in all haste.

She had barely finished her toilet when she heard loud cries and wails, punctuated by angry exclamations in a strident feminine voice. She listened for a moment only.

Those sounds came from the nursery. With her breath coming in hard gasps, she bounded from the room. With her heart beating frantically, she rushed toward the nursery and jerked the door open.

The sight which was presented to her eyes brought the blood to her face, and a cry of indignation to her lips.

Nora Evans held little Phyllis by the arm and was striking her repeatedly, not caring where the blows fell. The child was vainly endeavoring to cover her face and break away from her tormentor.

"Stop that!" Marie commanded, her voice trembling. "How dare you abuse that child in such a brutal manner? Don't you ever dare to attempt anything like that again!"

Phyllis, released, flew to the new governess, who picked her up and held her close.

That Nora Evans resented this interference became evident at once. There was a malevolent light in her faded eyes as they stared at Marie. She drew herself up haughtily.

"What right have you to boss me?" she asked.

"I have every right," Marie retorted.

"You just think you have," the other sneered. "I'll tell you this right now, Miss Desmond, if you want to get along in this house, you better mind your own business."

"That is what I am doing," the new governess said quietly. "I was given charge of the children."

"That don't mean a whole lot," Nora Evans returned impudently. "I take my orders from Mrs. Gordon, and she told me to break Phyllis of some of her bad habits. She has never learned to be obedient. When I punish her there is a reason for it."

"In what way was Phyllis disobedient now?" Marie demanded. "What did she do to deserve such brutal punishment?"

"She refused to put on her muslin dress," replied Nora. "She says she feels cold in it. But that is nothing but pure obstinacy, and I am going to drive it out of her. She'll either learn to mind me, or I'll beat her worse the next time. And I advise you to keep your distance."

Marie was suddenly conscious of a dreadful congestion about her heart. The pulses beat violently in her temples, and she began to tremble.

She felt how little Phyllis shivered in her arms. Should she, the mother, stand by without remonstrating and see her sweet baby girl mistreated by an obviously vulgar and cruel female like this Nora Evans? No, never!

She kissed the tear-stained face, then turned to the latter.

"Close that window," she ordered peremptorily.

"What for?" Nora snapped.

"Because it is too cool in this room," Marie replied, keeping herself under control with an effort. "And Phyllis is not going to put on that thin muslin dress. Let that be thoroughly understood."

Continued in next number

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